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Nation-building or state-making? India's North-East Frontier and the Ambiguities of Nehruvian Developmentalism, 1950-1959

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Few Indian regions evoke political, economic, and cultural marginalisation as much as North-East India. Solutions to its political instability often assume that, provided the vicious circle of under-development and violence can be broken, the region will eventually build a stable relationship with the Indian nation-state. This understanding in turns rests on a long intellectual genealogy that associates development with the state and the nation. By examining development schemes in the North-East Frontier Agency (today's Arunachal Pradesh) in the 1950-60s, a hitherto scarcely administered region where these were the primary mode of state-building, this paper cautions against the tendency to see the Indian state's developmental ambitions as an instrument of nation-building. Instead it argues that, in North-East India at least, state-building and nation-building have not historically gone together, and that developmentalism played an important part in this rupture. On the ground, tribal development did little for NEFA's integration into the Indian nation. In fact, state-building processes resulted in the disintegration of the links that had tied NEFA with its regional hinterland in India. In the process, some of the seeds of tensions plaguing today's Northeast India were planted.

Keywords: Tribal development; state-building; borderlands; North-East India

Introduction

Few Indian regions evoke political, economic, and cultural marginalisation as much as North-East India. In proposing solutions to its 'durable disorder' (Baruah 2007a), scholars and policy-makers often assume that, provided the vicious circle of under-development and violence can be broken, the region will eventually build a stable, positive relationship with the Indian nation-state (Planning Commission 1997; MDONER 2008; Barua 2005; Roy, Miri, and Goswami 2007).¹

These arguments participate in a long intellectual genealogy of 'developmental nationalism', in which nation, state, and development are deeply intertwined (Desai 2008a, 2008b). The historical emergence of nationalism was rooted in the experience and the contestation of the dynamics of imperial capitalism and the uneven development on which it rests (Nairn 1977). Indeed, in India itself, the earliest incarnations of nationalism were articulated not around the celebration of national culture but around a systematic economic critique of colonial rule, deemed responsible for the dislocation of India's society and economy and its mass poverty (Goswami 2004; Sarkar 2008). In this light, the attainment of freedom meant not merely putting an end to colonial rule, but also establishing a new political economy — a political economy that would unleash India's productive forces and create an egalitarian society, and hence throw the bases of a (re-)forged Indian nation (Desai 2008b). From the 1930s onwards, 'development' — interlinked with ideas

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¹ The Central government has in fact created a ministry specifically dedicated to the development of North-East India, the Ministry of Development of North-Eastern Region (MDONER).

of self-government and progress — therefore became central to mainstream visions of independent India. In the search for a specifically Indian path of development, the concept eventually coalesced around ideas of socialism, national discipline, and science (Zachariah 2005, 211).

State involvement was taken to be central to this developmental nationalism, for only the state had the capacity and reach to create a national political economy and to forge a united society. It was not merely that 'national backwardness and lack' required and legitimised state intervention in the economy; the state itself was represented as 'a subject of needs' (Roy 2007, 110). Building the state and building the nation therefore appeared to go hand in hand (Desai 2005; Roy 2007).

This paper cautions against this tendency to forget the 'hyphen between nation and state' (Ishikawa 2010, 3) and to see the Indian state's developmental ambitions as an instrument of nation-building. In North-East India at least, state-building and nation-building have not historically gone together, and developmentalism was a big factor in this rupture. This paper demonstrates this by looking at a region where, during the Nehruvian period, development was the primary mode of state-building: the North-East Frontier Agency (NEFA), today the state of Arunachal Pradesh.

Faced with the persisting impossibility of enforcing law and order and territorial control on the hitherto scarcely administered frontier, NEFA authorities — who responded not to the Assam Government but to the External Affairs Ministry — relied disproportionately on the vocabulary and practice of welfare and development for state-making throughout the 1950s. Combining a mixture of development and welfare schemes together with measures to protect and revive 'tribal' culture and lifestyles, the 'NEFA philosophy' (Elwin 1957) that they put forward was supposed not only to embed the state on the frontier, but also to 'inspire [frontier communities] with confidence and to make them feel at one with India, and to realise that they are part of India and have an honoured place in it' (Nehru 1985, 151).² In reality, tribal development did little for NEFA's integration into the Indian nation; in fact state-building processes resulted in the disintegration of the links that had tied NEFA with its regional hinterland in India. In the process, some of the seeds of tensions plaguing today's Northeast India were planted.

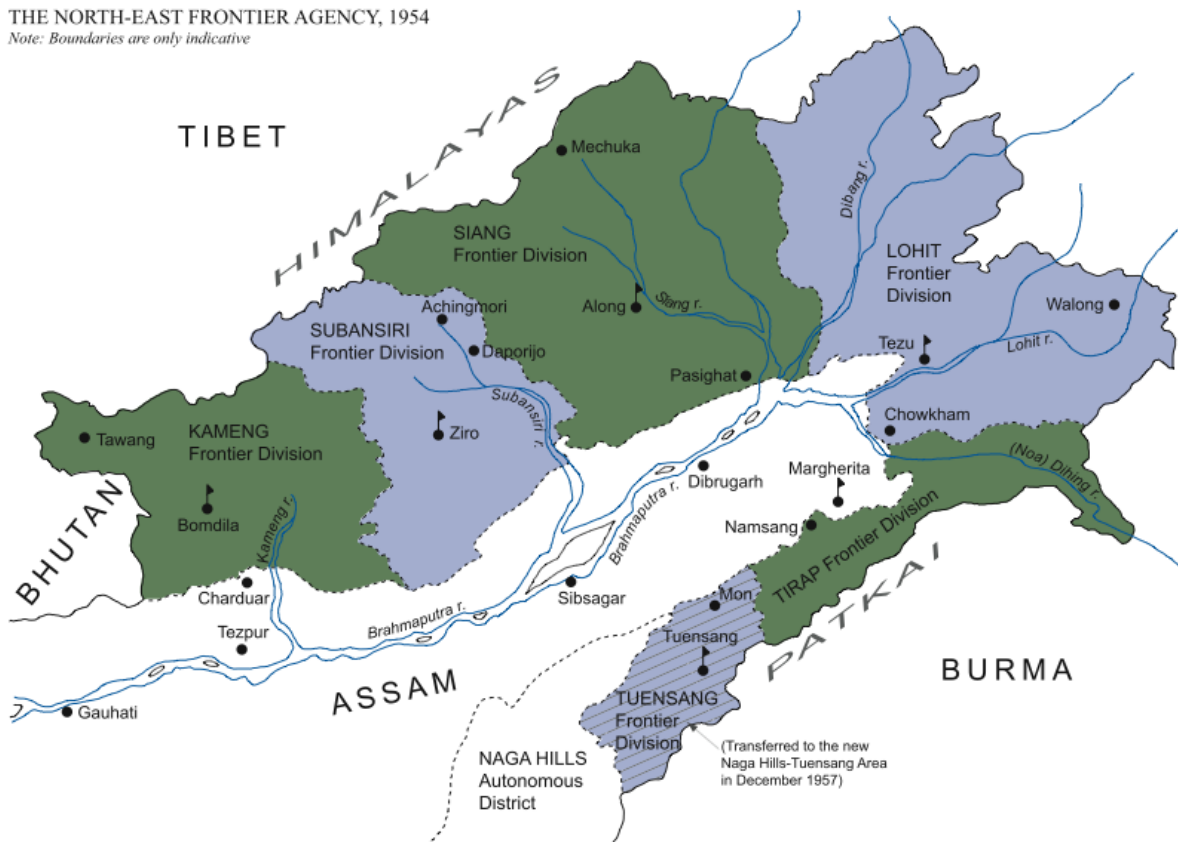
A privileged tool for state-making: Tribal development

Though nominally part of India since the Simla Convention of 1914 that had delimited the border between India and Tibet, NEFA was in practice little administered in 1947. Entire areas remained unexplored, and what few administrative and semi-military outposts existed lay in the foothills. The majority of the population, who belonged to several dozen different tribal communities of Tibetan and Southeast Asian stock, had never encountered agents of the Indian state. Indeed, in the northern reaches of the area the economic, political, and cultural influence was that of Tibet. Colonial regulations had instituted an Inner Line between NEFA and Assam, prohibiting the entry of outsiders into the latter — except for state officials — and limiting state expansion. NEFA was thus 'a territorial exterior of the theatre of capital [...and] a temporal outside of the historical pace of development and progress' (Kar 2009, 49-77, 51-52). Its special, un-administered status was further enshrined by the fact that, though constitutionally part of Assam, the borderland was administered by a frontier administration answering to the Central Ministry of External Affairs. Thus at the time of the transfer of power, everything remained to be done in terms of state-making and nation-building.

² The letter is dated 29 October 1952.

THE NORTH-EAST FRONTIER AGENCY, 1954

Note: Boundaries are only indicative



The Nehruvian era saw the genesis of the deployment of the Indian state's administrative and developmental apparatus and of a tribal-specific policy. State expansion in NEFA began in earnest in late 1950, after the promulgation of the Sixth Schedule and in the wake of a humanitarian catastrophe (the Assam earthquake, which for the first time caused the administration to undertake relief and rehabilitation efforts towards frontier tribes) and a geo-political crisis (the Chinese invasion of nearby Tibet) (Guyot-Réchar, forthcoming, chapter 2). Early 1951 witnessed the beginnings of a comprehensive push inland, aimed not just at strengthening control over strategic valleys but at expanding Indian authority on previously neglected areas. Exploration and consolidation were to eliminate the existence of unexplored areas as quickly as possible, particularly near the Tibetan border, and to open up border outposts at all the strategic points.³ In 1954, the promulgation of the North East Frontier Areas (Administration) Regulation consecrated administrative expansion and reorganised the Agency into six Frontier Divisions (Luthra 1971).

Beneath this apparent normalisation, however, NEFA authorities faced huge limitations on their law- and border-enforcement capabilities. First of all, they were confronted to an extremely mountainous, jungle-clad terrain — the same terrain that had represented such a big challenge to pre-colonial state-like polities attempting to conquer the Himalayan or Southeast Asian highlands (Scott 2009) — whose penetration was rendered even more difficult by a nine-month-

3. For a list of the number of outposts by the late 1950s, see Itanagar, Arunachal Pradesh State Archives, NEFA Secretariat (1958), List of administrative centres in NEFA, P66/58.

long monsoon. In addition, they also experienced pervasive manpower, financial, and material constraints. Personnel shortages that had plagued the administration even in the colonial period worsened as a consequence of Partition, for instance.⁴ While the administrative and technical situation improved from the mid-1950s onwards thanks to the creation of frontier-specific administrative and engineering cadres, shortages conversely worsened in the semi-military Assam Rifles forces, who were being diverted to the Naga hills to curb the mounting independence movement there.⁵ Moreover, the build-up of transport and communications infrastructure remained alarmingly slow throughout the 1950s. Even in 1960, this expansion of administration 'always in advance of its real resources in men and material' meant that the international border remained highly porous and several patches of unexplored areas still existed, and that due to the absence of road and wireless communication the whole administration could easily break down.⁶

Under these circumstances, the possibility and sustainability of state penetration hinged on the capacity of frontier authorities to express their authority and reach in (outwardly) benevolent terms, those of state-led development and cultural protection. This had been grasped by the last colonial officials, who asserted that 'any form of development is a political and strategic necessity', for 'a contented loyal population is [...] of the highest importance'.⁷ Obtaining tribal goodwill by undertaking welfare and development activities acquired an ever greater resonance once a resurgent China appeared on the other side of the border. Convinced that the Himalayas were a reliable physical barrier against invasion and hence that militarising NEFA was not a priority, however, Indian authorities were much more worried about the pull effect of Chinese presence on frontier populations: concerns thus lay in convincing the latter not to look towards China ('The Himalayan frontier I', *Times of India*, 22 November 1950).⁸ Parallel to administrative expansion, therefore, the 1950s saw the introduction of a flurry of development and welfare schemes on the frontier, from the introduction of wet-rice cultivation and husbandry to the opening of schools, dispensaries, and hospitals, or the founding of crafts training and production centres.

Welfare schemes and activities enabled the entrenchment of the Indian state on the frontier in a way that had hitherto eluded it. This was, to begin with, because their implementation led to the systematisation of a mundane practice essential to the iteration of the state's vertical properties: inspections (Ferguson and Gupta 2002, 987). While administrative touring was a fundamental component of the relationship between tribal populations and the state, officers and subordinate

4. New Delhi, NAI, External Affairs Proceedings (1956), Consolidation of NEFA administration upto the border, 7(31)-NEFA/56.; New Delhi, NAI, External Affairs Proceedings (1947), Appointment of Captain Campbell, Major Kathing and Captain Sailo for work in the Assam Tribal Areas, 80-NEF/47; New Delhi, NAI, External Affairs Proceedings (1947), Arrangement for the staffing of the agencies in the North-East Frontier, 51-NEF/47.

5. NAI, External 7(31)-NEFA/56. Points for Adviser's discussion regarding the expansion programme in New Delhi.

6. Ibid.

7. London, British Library, Miscellaneous papers relating to the North-East Frontier of India (1945), 'Blueprint for Sadiya: A post-war reconstruction plan for Sadiya Frontier Tract', by G. E. D. Walker London, D1191/11.

8. This view would prevail up to 1962, when the ex-Adviser to the Governor G.E.D. Walker expressed his doubts that the Chinese would ever be able to go down the Lohit Valley as a result of the earthquake. 'Assam Rifles post at Walong was set up in 1944', *Assam Tribune*, 15 November 1962.

staff remained few in numbers. By contrast, the creation of various development branches quickly led to the recruitment of medical, agricultural, or crafts inspectors and sub-inspectors. Not only did this sheer multiplication in the number of touring officials increase the frequency to which tribal communities encountered the state; but because such inspectors were locally based, they could also cover the surrounding areas more intensely. Moreover, every single touring officer, regardless of rank or capacity, was required to report and give his opinion on both their sphere of interest and the rest.⁹ The encounter with a low-rank inspector one week, the Chief Medical Officer the other, and perhaps the Governor at some point, constructed a perception of the state as a complex, top-down hierarchy. Whereas the lonely Political Officer on tour in the 1940s had presented a very flat vision of it, the NEFA administration was now gradually acquiring the 'topography of stacked, vertical levels' integral to perceptions of the modern state (Ferguson and Gupta 2002, 983).

State-making also informed the very fabric of development structures on the frontier, which increasingly centred around Community Projects and National Extension Schemes, i.e., development 'blocks' that involved selecting a specific tribal area for concentrated, all-round development: agriculture; healthcare; education; sanitation; cottage industries. This concentration of all development activities into one overall scheme proceeded from two rationales. First the Indian state hoped to make a concentrated demonstration of *everything* it could do (that is, could provide) for the population; second, it aimed to anchor its presence in both the everyday, the mundane, and in the exceptional.

The latter aspect was performed in elaborate, carefully planned out inauguration ceremonies. In 1953 for instance, a one-day long programme of festivities was planned, after much administrative brainstorming, for the brand new Namsang block. It included a guard of honour; collaborative fieldwork, including tree planting and village clearing; as well as collective feasts, tribal dances, and a cinema show. Together, these different activities at once embodied the authority of the state, the new order to come (through a revamped village), the links between frontier administration and society (through a common meal), the promise of development (fieldwork was inaugurated by the governor himself and there was a small-scale exhibit on education, agriculture, and health), and the celebration of tribal culture.¹⁰ The elaborate rituals associated with their opening were thus a performance the 'vertical' properties of the state, symbolised in particular through the governor or the adviser descending among the tribes to assert the benevolent presence of the state.

This state-making process hinged on a crucial variable: the attitude and actions of frontier populations themselves. Critics of post-colonial governmentality too readily assume that development is a purely top-down process, in which populations constitute mere 'targets' of government schemes (Chatterjee 2004, 34-37). A critical analysis of the developmental state does not need, however, to see the latter as single-handedly imposing its logic of welfare. Indeed, in the case of NEFA frontier administration focused on developmentalism not merely (nor even primarily) because of the Nehru-Elwin philosophy, but because its limitations had long taught it

9. The main sources for this are the countless tour diaries written by frontier officers. Some of them are more informative than others, for instance Itanagar, Arunachal Pradesh State Archives, NEFA Secretariat (1958), Tour diary of LRN Srivastava, ARO Siang, R-58/58.

10. Itanagar, Arunachal Pradesh State Archives, NEFA Secretariat (1953), Inauguration of 2nd Community Development Block at Namsang, CP-132/53.

that it could not work without tribal communities *and* because these populations themselves were often demanding welfare measures.

The weakness of the late colonial and early post-colonial frontier state gave tribals a lot of latitude to 'work' the state. Even by pan-Indian standards, its knowledge-gathering and organisational capabilities were highly deficient.¹¹ In particular, nowhere were officers so few or entrusted with such large areas and, as a result, they disproportionately relied on a group of native actors: Political Interpreters and Tibetan Agents. Their linguistic mastery and ties to the local community were crucial in collecting indigenous information and smoothening out state expansion, from settling the pay of porters to negotiating entry into local villages and communicating about official policy.¹² Council elders, *gaonburas*, slaves, and traders were also solicited to tap into native information networks and administer justice. As the developmental state gathered pace some of these strongmen, and especially the new generation of educated tribals, were inducted into the lower levels of administration by being hired as village workers (Mize 2001, 21, 25).

Here was therefore a space for significant local agency. Evidently, the various frontier populations did not see the arrival of the state as a wonderful event, and communities dealt with both administrative expansion and developmental schemes in very varied ways. Some communities could adopt 'conspiracies of silence' towards a new administrative presence, 'profess[ing] ignorance' and being 'purposely evasive'.¹³ Others, conversely (and sometimes from the same tribe), were unexpectedly welcoming. Some and even demanded a new outpost.¹⁴ Schemes or policies well accepted in one community or village could be resisted or evaded in others; and different groups and individuals could adopt contrasting attitudes. These varied reactions were often due to dynamics internal to their social, economic, and cultural environment. The Apa Tanis, for instance, had welcomed the establishment of administration in the hope that it would settle their feuds against neighbouring Dafla communities in their favour.¹⁵

Inequalities in this regard were both changeable and multi-faceted, but they were above all individual, spatial, and generational. Individuals who met frontier officials early on were more likely to become interpreters or contractors. Similarly, communities that came in contact with state structures first had a powerful advantage over those that came later, resulting in a disproportionate leverage of communities situated closer to the foothills or to administrative headquarters. And gradually, a small cohort of young, educated tribals emerged from the first schools established on the frontier. Inducted into the lower ranks of administration as village workers, they soon began to compete with the older generation of headmen for local influence.

Once administrative expansion began gathering pace, however, these dynamics were re-articulated under — and around — state presence: the potential for agency gradually shifted to those with prior and better access to the government structures. Frontier developmentalism reinforced this dynamic by raising the stakes of prior or better access to access government jobs,

11. For an analysis of the colonial 'information order' in India, see C. A. Bayly (1996).

12. See for instance Arunachal Pradesh State Archives, NEFA Secretariat (1954), Tour diary of Assistant Tibetan Agent Mechukha; APSA, P-82/55.

13. New Delhi, NAI, External Affairs Proceedings (1945), Tour diaries of Capt Davy in the Dafla hills, 241-CA/45., 13 March 1945

14. Itanagar, Arunachal Pradesh State Archives, NEFA Secretariat (1952), Tour diary of PO Sela, P-29/52, pp.6-7.

15. BL, IOR/L/PS/12/3120. Report on Tour to Eastern Daflas and Apa Tani, Nov-Dec 1945, p.8.

schemes, and resources at both individual and collective levels. Development blocks, in particular, created a spatial boundary between those populations covered by them and those which were not. Whereas earlier on, 'access' had meant influencing a touring official to settle an inter-tribal feud in one's favour, it now meant convincing the administration to implement a welfare scheme in one's own community rather than elsewhere; being chosen as a contractor for a big bridge-building scheme; receiving a variety of political gifts; or being sent on an all-expenses paid trip to Delhi.

Increasingly therefore, communities and individuals alike used the administration's need for their cooperation on infrastructure and other work to make various demands on the state. In some cases, it was for the recognition of local institutions. More often, however, it was to obtain welfare and infrastructure facilities. In one locality, a touring officer might face demands for wire ropes to bridge the river. In another, villagers might ask questions regarding agricultural methods that went far beyond official objectives, causing the administration to launch a programme of research and trial to support 'more intelligent and progressive farmers'.¹⁶ The biggest demands (and complaints), however, concerned the availability of educational, and healthcare infrastructure (Verghese, 'The Last Frontier IV', *Times of India*, 4 February 1956).

Tribal communities were self-aware about these new dynamics. Competition for schemes became fierce, and the communities with the longest and strongest history of contact with government schemes and officials were also the most vocal in their dealings with frontier administration. In 1961, the Minyong council thus demanded that the Pangin administrative centre — located among the Padam tribe — be immediately shifted to Boleng, on their territory. To give added weight to the demand, all the Minyongs in Boleng constructed a helipad of their own initiative (Mibang 2001, 26-29). Individuals or communities that felt disadvantaged in the process had their own way of responding: arriving in a new community as a village worker, a young tribal thus the *gaonbura* had built his living quarters two miles from the village and refused to move them (Mize 2001, 21-25). The boundary was now between those who had ties to states, and those that did not (or not to the same extent).

Nation-building: Lost in translation?

Did this emerging reality of 'India' as a state necessarily translate into 'India' as a nation? Under the official discourse of the NEFA administration, the answer was yes. Elwin's *Philosophy for NEFA* envisioned state-making as automatically leading to the emergence of a national sentiment: 'we hope to see as the result of our efforts a spirit of love and loyalty for India, without a trace of suspicion that Government has come into the tribal areas to colonise or exploit, a full integration of mind and heart with the great society of which the tribal people form a part [...]' (Elwin 1957, 9). Theoretically, therefore, state- and nation-building were conflated. Yet, on the ground, there was a significant gap between the two.

The first gap between nation- and state-building proceeded precisely from the fact that Indian authorities presumed them to be inherently linked: since it would naturally flow from economic betterment and a revived tribal culture, how to bring about nation-building did not need theorisation or systematic planning. In contrast to the long discussions on fine-tuning development schemes, the ways to improve the acceptability and permanence of administrative presence, and strategies to preserve and celebrate 'tribalness', government archives show a great

16. Itanagar, Arunachal Pradesh State Archives, NEFA Secretariat (1952), Tour notes of Agricultural Officer, Jan 1952, Agri-7/52, 16.

paucity of strategic reflections on 'selling NEFA to India and India to NEFA'.¹⁷ Even when Elwin outlined the 'psychological aims' of the NEFA philosophy, it was by framing them in the negative terms of preventing the birth of an inferiority complex among frontier populations (Elwin 1957, 51-77). No strategy or substantial concrete steps for the development of positive, substantive interaction between NEFA's inhabitants and people from the rest of India were made. This lack of prioritisation was reflected in the secondary, adjunct role played by the Publicity Branch of the NEFA Research Department and Elwin's great reluctance towards 'Delhi's plans' for publicising India to frontier populations and vice-versa.¹⁸

The practical aspects of nation-building were therefore under-theorised, and initiatives in this direction were highly fragmented. Administrative and development staff touring the countryside screened documentaries with the assistance of mobile cinema units and magic lanterns during their tours,¹⁹ but what particular message was delivered by these shows remains unclear. Many reels apparently served to highlight progress across the frontier and rewards associated with them, but none of them overtly focussed on any common path its inhabitants might share with India at large. Development was not necessarily characterised as an Indian effort — wet-rice cultivation was promoted as a Japanese technique — and movies screenings were a thematic hodgepodge ranging from Manipuri drums and Gandhi's life to animal fights and the African wilderness.²⁰

Thematic confusion aside, the 'authorial voice' of the state, working towards nation-building, that some scholars see expressed in such movies (Roy 2007) was in fact far from unmediated. Documentaries were not shown in brute form but accompanied by the commentary of interpreters who — since they were deeply inserted in local relations and structures of power — likely represented competing or at least subversive authorial voices. In any case, these interpreters' own capacity to translate was mitigated by the huge linguistic variety encountered in NEFA. Yet frontier administration remained strangely oblivious of the substantive role of tribal interpreters in conveying a message, and bypassed the question of the transferability of notions such as 'nation' into different tribal world-views and the audience's own interpretations.

As a result, contrary to state-making, nation-building was peripheral and contingent rather than central to frontier policy. The first sign of this imbalance was that, in contrast to the embeddedness of state-making practices in both the everyday and special occasions, the nation was iterated not as a part of daily life, but as part of the exceptional.

While nations are constructed through images of communion between members that do not know each other personally, the tools conducive to a simultaneous, homogeneous time — the printed press and a literate population (Anderson 1991, 6, 37) — were absent on Assam's north-east frontier. Even more than elsewhere in India, therefore, performing the nation rested above all on the twin practices of celebrating Republic Day and Independence Day in the Frontier Divisions and of inviting tribal guests to attend and perform during the big parades in Delhi.²¹ These initiatives served several, interlinked purposes. First, they helped reinforce the state's vital

17. New Delhi, NMML, Elwin Papers (1961), Differing views on publicity set up in NEFA, 1954-61, S.No.128, 2.

18. NMML, Elwin Papers S.No.128.

19. Ibid 2-3.

20. Itanagar, Arunachal Pradesh State Archives, NEFA Secretariat (1953), Tour diary of Publicity Inspector, ACT-18/53.

21. On the nation-building functions of these parades, see Roy (2007).

relationship with tribal elites. Attendees were local leaders and strongmen, such as the Rani of the Akas or lamas from the Tawang monastery.²² Second, their witnessing the parade in Delhi on the same day that tribals celebrated in their own way helped, later on, to highlight the 'simultaneous time' inhabited by NEFA and the rest of India (Nehru 1985, 225).²³ Upon their return to NEFA, these guests were each given a set of photographs of the celebrations to treasure and show to the rest of their community.²⁴ Yet for all the merriment they entailed, these public celebrations still belonged to the realm of the exceptional. They took place on two days of the year only, and the potential for a tribal to attend one of them was dependent on his or her being relatively close to an administrative centre of development block.

The same exceptionality can be discerned in carefully planned visits by 'V.I.P.s' such as successive Assam governors or key central officials. These V.I.P.s were more likely to mention 'India' than touring frontier officers, who primarily focused on development and 'tribalness'. They also drew huge numbers of frontier inhabitants to them (how these visits were announced is nowhere mentioned). Nehru for instance addressed some 10,000 people in the Balipara foothills in 1952, and seized the opportunity to emphasise India's friendliness towards its neighbours and the responsibility of frontier populations to keep it safe. To another community, he also emphasised that 'they belonged to a very big country the name of which was Hindustan or Bharat. This vast country was inhabited by millions of people and it was his desire as the Prime Minister to see all of them live happily and do their own part' ('Nehru assures help to all frontier tribals', *The Assam Tribune*, 23 October 1952).

Here again, however, these visits were circumscribed in time, and limited to a few well administered areas — mainly the headquarters and the foothills — of a territory that is nearly as big as that of West Bengal. Moreover while each these visits indeed seemed to have gone well, tribal attendance may also have been motivated by the need to evaluate this new phenomenon of state presence. To NEFA's inhabitants, belonging to an Indian nation might therefore have been a feeling experienced temporarily, on set and clearly defined dates, receding afterwards and remaining forgotten until the next big event.

If nation-building was contingent, it also obeyed an overarching rationale of the Nehru-Elwin policy: *the state as mediator and superior to the nation*. Even in the bounded time-space where tribal belonging to a wider Indian 'brotherhood' was emphasised, such as in public celebrations, this brotherhood was itself delimited in very specific ways. See the Governor's speech inaugurating the Namsang development block in 1953:

[F]rom now onwards you must all consider yourselves as brothers, live in peace and so help each other for you good. [...] We who have come from outside to this village, some from the plains, from Gauhati, Dibrugarh, Delhi, Calcutta, we all are just like your brothers. Other people elsewhere are also your brothers. We are all one. This you should understand [...] A few years ago English Kings used to rule this country. But their rule is over. We told them that we people, all of us, would govern our own country. We shall work for our own

22. Guwahati, Assam State Archives, Tribal Areas Department (1952), Republic Day celebrations 1953, TAD/ Con/119/52. Daulatram to Medhi, 6 January 1953; Itanagar, Arunachal Pradesh State Archives, NEFA Secretariat (1960), Tribal invitees from NEFA to witness the Republic Day Celebrations 1961 P57/60.

²³ Letter dated 27 January 1953.

24. Itanagar, Arunachal Pradesh State Archives, NEFA Secretariat (1956), Distribution of photos on Republic Day celebration in New Delhi by NEFA in 1956 R-40/56.

people. We want our people to be prosperous and rich. [...] At present people think that you are very backward. Goodness or badness does not depend upon how many clothes you wear. [...] But people of other places think you are backward. We want that you should be able to dress yourselves better. You may not copy other forms of dress. [...] We want also that your houses should be clean. [...] Human beings like you have manufactured motor cars, aeroplanes, watches. So also we want you and your children should be as clever as anybody else in the world. We want your children to be educated in the school and later on in a big school which is called college. One day one of your children will become the Political Officer of your district. You may not today believe it. But I tell you that your children are born clever and if they study properly, they will rise and occupy high positions and one of you can even become a Governor. You are as good as anybody else. [...] One day you will find that my words will come true.²⁵

Here, tribal communities were reminded of the existence of a world beyond NEFA (people coming from the plains, as far as Delhi); the anti-colonial struggle was evoked as a common fight; and images of general prosperity for people within and beyond the frontier were summoned. Yet at the same time, the speech shied away from explicitly mentioning India: the word does not once appear in the speech and other inhabitants within the nation's boundaries were only alluded to as 'people'. Moreover, rather than being on the sharing of trials and hopes between equals, the focus was on tribal communities striving to reach up to the level of the rest of the 'people'. Rather than a pre-existing common destiny, what NEFA's inhabitants could hope for was coming to the level of others. While present, India-as-nation therefore quickly drowned.

There was a towering presence in the speech, however — that of the Indian state. The 'we who have come from outside [...] just like your brothers' referred to the administration's officials, not to private citizens. And the goal, the ultimate proof, of having 'caught up' lay in securing a government position, rather than in the assumption of political rights. The ideal to achieve was not that of a citizen of India; but of a (frontier) bureaucrat.

In other words, the Nehru-Elwin philosophy relied — both in its implementation and underlying rationale — on the construction of the state's idea and apparatus as the go-between between tribals and the nation at large. This construction worked in both directions (whether in bringing awareness of India to NEFA or publicising NEFA to the rest of India) and expressed itself primarily in two ways: limiting physical interaction between frontier inhabitants and other Indian citizens; and controlling the flow of information to and from the frontier.

This was not the only way in which the state acted as a filter between NEFA and the rest of India. Simultaneously, NEFA authorities made decided attempts to reshape the politics of tribal belonging around the Indian state, narrowly embodied in frontier administration. From the mid-1950s onwards, creating feelings of belonging between the local population and the administration became an overarching policy imperative on a par with other aspects of the NEFA philosophy. The administration was urged to adopt a 'missionary' outlook, and to act as a 'family' both within its ranks and in forging ties with local populations, ensuring that 'the tribes regard themselves as one with ourselves'.²⁶ 'We are to guide our children', Elwin wrote in November 1955.²⁷ Running through much of the official record on NEFA for the period, this 'family

25. APSA, CP-132/53 27-30.

26. Delhi, NMML, Rustomji Papers (1963), Broadcasts, tour notes, articles etc (1959-63), S.No.8., p.11

27. Delhi, NMML, Elwin Papers (1957), Report by Verrier Elwin on tours 1954-57, S.No.138., Teju to Roing, November 1955, p.44

rhetoric' aimed to upgrade the relationship between the administration and the tribes into a sort of emotional symbiosis.²⁸

To do this, frontier staff first had to firmly anchor themselves among tribal communities. This was a challenge, for staff turn-over was high. Few officers remained in their post for long. From the late 1950s onwards, the administration sought to curb the number of transfers out of NEFA by scrutinising and discouraging every one of them: constant reshuffling was harmful not just for development work but also for 'psychological integration'.²⁹ In parallel, the earlier preference for bachelors as frontier officers gave way to an active policy of recruiting married couples. In several cases husband and wife were each hired in their individual capacity,³⁰ but more generally the latter played an unofficial role. Officers' wives not only constituted a useful manpower reserve, but their presence also enabled the forging of 'soft', more spontaneous relations with the tribes, less bound by the paraphernalia of authority (Krishnatry 2005).

Yet the elaboration of new forms of belonging embedding the frontier state with local populations lay, above all, in the former adopting external signs of 'tribalness'.³¹ While local authorities attempted to assert their spatial authority over tribal communities through developmentalism, they simultaneously needed to externally blur the boundary between state and society by presenting the former as externally akin to, and understanding of, the latter. In other words, the NEFA administration had to 'look tribal' in order for the population to identify with it, even as in practice, this population's prospects within its higher reaches were few. This was a subtle equilibrium to find.

Elwin attempted to find it by outwardly 'tribalising' both the state's agents and its buildings. Whether in the Education Department or in other administrative divisions, learning local languages was a key duty of frontier staff.³² Staff were also strongly encouraged to wear tribal dress. Senior frontier officials tried to show the lead in these matters.³³ Finally, touring officials were encouraged to drink rice-beer with the population and to partake in tribal feasts and ceremonies as much as possible — so long as they were welcomed to do so — and common activities were favoured, such as football matches between local youth and Assam Rifles. The many pictures of these activities taken by the NEFA Publicity Branch testify to the importance attached to the forging of such informal links; some of them, in fact, might have been enlarged and displayed in administrative centres to further highlight this new dynamic.³⁴

28. For example New Delhi, NMML, Elwin Papers (1955), Change of designation of political officers, S.No.119., Mehta to Kaul, 12 December 1955

29. Delhi, NMML, Elwin Papers (1957), Correspondence with Ministry of External Affairs about Research Fellowships, 1956-57, S.No.5., Note on the various points raised by the Ministry

30. NMML, Elwin Papers S.No.119., Mehta to Kaul, 12 December 1955

31. A similar idea had animated colonial officials on the North-West Frontier under the 'Sandeman system' (Marsden and Hopkins 2011, chapter 2).

32. New Delhi, NAI, External Affairs Proceedings (1956), Dr Elwin's notes on his visit to Bomdila and Tawang, 4(5)-NEFA/56; NMML, Elwin Papers S.No.5.

33. NMML, Elwin Papers S.No.5. Note on the various points raised by the Ministry.

34. [See the photographic collections of the Arunachal Pradesh IPR Department, particularly for 1958 and 1959.](#)



Nari Rustomji, Advisor to the Governor of Assam, dancing with Adi (Abor) warriors at Along, Siang Division, 1959

Courtesy: Arunachal Pradesh Information and Public Relations Department

In and of themselves, these tensions between state-making and nation-building could just have represented the difficulties inherent in an early stage of nation-building. What turned them into antithetical projects was the fact that, instead of fostering NEFA's integration with its Indian hinterland, the NEFA philosophy led to the hardening of cultural, economic, and political differences between the hills of NEFA and the plains of Assam, undermining nation-building and planting the seed for future conflicts.

By its very nature, the policy of central authorities in charge of NEFA gradually eroded the interaction and miscegenation between NEFA and neighbouring parts of Assam. In spite of the Inner Line, frontier populations had historically been a nodal point between the Indian, Sino-Tibetan, and Burmese worlds. Economic, cultural, and population flux permeated India's north-eastern borderlands from all directions, and ties with Assam were of all sorts, particularly for communities living close to it. The Noctes of Tirap had adopted Vaishnavism,³⁵ the Sherdukpens of Kameng migrated to the plains during winter, and some Daflas had established themselves there permanently.³⁶ There was also significant economic inter-dependence – the Sherdukpens, for instance, largely depended on plains rice, which they generally obtained in exchange for

35. Elwin 9, 153 Note, Elwin (pp.40-48) [post-1962]

36. London, SOAS, Fürer-Haimendorf Papers (1945), Diary of Fürer-Haimendorf's first tour to the Apa Tani Valley, 1944-45, PP MS 19, Box 3.

radish and chilly³⁷ – as well important elements of cultural miscegenation. The lower Abor had long imbued Assamese merchandise and ideas, and their sister tribe, the Miris (Mishings), had long established themselves in the plains (Nyori 1993, 195; Borang 2001, 14-18).

These linkages gradually eroded over the course of the 1950s, first of all as a consequence of the tenets of the NEFA philosophy. First, the full economic and food self-sufficiency of frontier populations, which was a core aspect of state developmentalism, entailed reducing inter-dependence with Assam.³⁸ Second, the preservation of tribal pride, culture, and traditions translated, under Elwin's leadership, into an active process of (re-)creation of 'tribalness'. Envisioned (and promoted) by frontier administration, the process was characterised as 'introducing certain good things,' from dances and songs to new crafts and to the standardisation and promotion of festivals – so long as they were deemed appropriately tribal.³⁹

These visions of tribalness were not all inclusive; indeed, they were highly selective. In particular, they actively reified the boundary between the 'tribal' and the 'non-tribal'. Assamese-influenced dress was deemed inappropriate;⁴⁰ tribes that seasonally moved to the plains were discouraged to do so,⁴¹ and existing trade routes between the hills and the plains progressively died out, for example the cattle trade of the Apa Tani tribe.⁴² Festivals and exhibitions that occasionally gathered people from the hills and the lowlands together also died out after the mid-1950s.⁴³

Not all these changes resulted from a deliberate desire to insulate the uplands' cultural and economic world; nor were all these policies successful. But, in any event, the increasing cultural and economic distance that came as a by-product of the NEFA philosophy contributed to insulating the 'real' tribals of the 'highlands' from the rest of Assam's own very mixed population, including tribal communities living in the plains.

The hills/plains and tribal/non-tribal divide also crystallised in the Nehruvian era as a result of increasing conflicts between Delhi and successive Assam ministries. These tensions proceeded, in no small extent, from the confrontation of central designs for state-building and the Assam government's own *region-building* plans. Following the transfer of Bengali-speaking Sylhet to East Pakistan in 1947, the Assamese had achieved a position of demographic dominance in the state and their politicians actively sought to culturally re-organise north-eastern India around Assam (Bhaumik 1998, 310-327). The provincial leadership had initially accepted the constitutional decision to retain NEFA under central administration for the time being, on account of its 'backward' and weakly administered condition. Yet it argued that the Constitution made NEFA's 'progressive assimilation' into Assam the ineluctable, 'ultimate goal' of frontier

37. Itanagar, Arunachal Pradesh State Archives, Arunachal Pradesh State Archives (1945), Tour Diary of PO Balipara, Feb 1944 - Nov 1945.

38. This meant first and foremost self-sufficiency in food production, but also extended to artefacts, dress, and material things in general.

39. NMML, Elwin Papers S.No.149.

40. Delhi, NMML, Elwin Papers (1956), Comments on ATA's reports, 1954-59, S.No.133., Rustomji Note, 19 April 1956.

41. Elwin's notes on his visit to Bomdila and Tawang Dr Elwin's notes on his visit to Bomdila and Tawang, 4(5)-NEFA/56).

42. London, SOAS, Fürer-Haimendorf Papers (1945), Diary of Fürer-Haimendorf's first tour to the Apa Tani Valley, 1944-45, PP MS 19, Box 3.

43. The last one took place in 1954. 'Hills and plains festival: Artistes and athletes to join in large numbers', *The Assam Tribune* (11 December 1953); and NMML, Elwin Papers S.No.149.

policy, and that consequently the duty of (interim) central administration was to prepare it for this as quickly as possible.⁴⁴ Assam authorities therefore sought to retain an active involvement in NEFA — insisting on being consulted by frontier administration⁴⁵ or participating in relief and rehabilitation efforts after the 1950 earthquake⁴⁶ — and used Republic Day thematic shows in Delhi to re-affirm that NEFA was part of Assam.⁴⁷

Significantly, Assam officials — from Gopinath Bardoloi and Bishnuram Medhi, the first two Chief Ministers, to MLAs like Hem Barua — harnessed a vocabulary that drew on a pan-Indian nation-building rhetoric of 'unity in diversity' (Roy 2007). Claims for greater regional integration were articulated around the twin images of 'India's sentinel' and 'Assam as a miniature India'.⁴⁸ The first image implied that to save itself, India had to save Assam; the second that the Centre could not possibly dismantle Assam without simultaneously undermining the very rationale for Indian unity.⁴⁹

An increasing tug-of-war ensued between State government and central/frontier administration, which the former eventually lost. In contrast to the general disinterest of pan-Indian politicians and public opinion for NEFA, Assam policy-makers and newspapers consistently criticised frontier policy throughout the 1950s. The administration's 'iron curtain' was vilified, and above all, the decision to privilege Hindi as the second language of the tribes was made the object of a particularly strong campaign. For the provincial Congress Committee, 'the relation of Assam and the North-East Frontier Areas. [...was] natural and inseparable from the point of history and geography', yet 'the working of the administration [was] not conducive towards realisation of the underlying policy and object as contemplated in the constitution'.⁵⁰

For their part, central and frontier authorities were increasingly critical of Assam, and therefore ill-disposed towards fostering or retaining links with it. For instance, Nehru was highly critical of the way state authorities had handled the 1950 earthquake crisis. This propagated the idea that Assam was incapable (financially or otherwise) of taking care of itself and its tribal inhabitants. Medhi's authoritarian attitude towards the tribal Autonomous Districts of Assam, his frequent talk of 'assimilation',⁵¹ as well as the increasing political mobilisation of north-eastern tribes and the degeneration of the Naga conflict, further played against Assam. The result was the progressive administrative separation of NEFA from Assam, long before the area became the Union Territory of Arunachal Pradesh in 1972. From 1953 onwards, the foundation of a separate

44. New Delhi, NMML, B.N. Medhi Papers (1952-53), Correspondence with Nehru regarding the administration of NEF areas, Subject File No.2., Medhi to Nehru, 6 June 1952.

45. Ibid.

46. See editions of the *Amrita Bazaar Patrika* for August 1950.

47. ASA, TAD/ Con/119/524.

48. These rhetoric were initially deployed in Constituent Assembly Debates, especially Constituent Assembly, Constituent Assembly Debates (Proceedings) IX, (1946-1950), <http://parliamentofindia.nic.in/ls/debates/debates.htm> [accessed 5 October 2009]. The "miniature India" argument was especially put forward by the Assam Sahitya Sabha association. See *The outlook on NEFA*, ed. by Assam Sahitya Sabha (Calcutta: Nabajiban Press, 1958).

49. 'The general population of Assam consists of tribals and non-tribals. By keeping a considerable number of tribals separate from another considerable no of them as also from the non-tribals of Assam, how can the Centre hope to create a united Indian nation? Indian unity lies among others through the integrity of a frontier state like Assam.' NMML, Medhi Papers, S.F. No.2., Medhi to Nehru, 14 May 1953.

50. New Delhi, NMML, APCC Papers (1955), APCC Proceedings, 1937-55, Reel 3599.

51. NMML, Medhi Papers, S.F. No.2.

frontier cadre were laid⁵² — officially created in 1956 as the Indian Frontier Administrative Service (IFAS)⁵³ — and communications between frontier authorities and the State Government gradually died out.⁵⁴ By 1959, External Affairs discussed changing the title of NEFA's top official (the Advisor to the Governor) to 'Chief Commissioner', and transforming NEFA itself into a 'North-East Frontier Territory' to mark central jurisdiction.⁵⁵

The tribal inhabitants of the foothills between NEFA and Assam populations were the most affected by this increasing distantiation. Various communities protested against this dynamic, which impeded on their freedom of movement and went against their economic inter-dependence and cultural ties.⁵⁶ The Miris from Upper Assam, in particular, contended that they were the sister tribe of the Abors of central NEFA, with common ancestors, customs, and manners; they stressed that they originally all came from the hills, and that some of them indeed still remained there, just as some Abors sometimes migrated to the plains. From their perspective, the hills-plains divide did not and should not exist.⁵⁷

Conclusion

Over the 1950s and early 1960s, the Indian state gradually expanded into its remote and hitherto largely forgotten eastern Himalayan borderland. Tribal developmentalism was the most important tool in this evolution, not least because, in a context where the state was defined by vulnerability, NEFA's inhabitants found in it a way to negotiate their acquiescence to its presence in exchange for tangible goods and benefits. While this expansion did not go without hurdles — indeed, it was a protracted, uneven, and non-linear process, which tribal agency could constrain or conversely enable — it would eventually succeed in making the Indian state something of a reality, a tangible presence on the frontier.

Yet this state-making process was not accompanied by a parallel process of 'becoming Indian' (Alam 2008). Rhetorically, the representatives of the Indian state claimed to be working towards the region's integration into an Indian nation. But on the ground, awareness of India as a nation was restricted to a limited time-space, and official initiatives to shape new forms of belonging were narrowly articulated around frontier state authorities themselves. In fact, in many ways state-making undermined the possibilities for nation-building in NEFA. By limiting interaction and movement between the frontier and the rest of India and attempting to revive a supposedly authentic 'tribalness' — purified of any 'non-tribal' content, especially Assamese — NEFA authorities unravelled the dynamic, hybrid political economy that had linked frontier inhabitants to the Brahmaputra valley, and sealed them away from the national mainstream. The increasingly confrontational relationship between Delhi and the Assam government only accelerated this

52. New Delhi, NAI, External Affairs Proceedings (1953), Notes by T.N. Kaul, N/53/1395/105.

53. New Delhi, NAI, External Affairs Proceedings (1956), Election of NEFA officers and their appointment to the Indian Frontier Administrative Service, 18(5)-NEFA/56.

54. In early 1953, Nehru agreed to consult the State Government on frontier appointments. NMML, Medhi Papers, S.F. No.2.

55. Delhi, NMML, Rustomji Papers (1962), Correspondence as Adviser to Governor of Assam and Dewan of Sikkim (1953-62), S.No.3., Handing over note by TN Kaul.

56. Delhi, NMML, APCC Papers (1956), Sadiya District Congress Committee, 1955-56, Packet 23, File No.12., Mishmis to Nehru, 11 December 1955 (pp.20-23).

57. New Delhi, NMML, APCC Papers (1956), Re-organisation Commission, 1954-56, Packet 98, File No.10., Representation by the All Assam Miri Sanmilan, 18 May 1955 (pp.118-21).

isolation. In the process, state-building contributed to the creation of North-East India, a fragmented region impossibly divided into territorial 'homelands' based on exclusive claims to indigeneity (Baruah 2008, 15-19), whose relationship to India is marked by enduring alienation and which occupies a marginal place in the country's 'national imaginary' (Tillin 2007, 58; Sonwalkar 2004).

While it does show that the Nehruvian developmental state was both at the forefront and the centre of the refashioning of a post-colonial *identity*, NEFA's story tells us that this identity was not necessarily '*nation-statist*' (Roy 2007, emphasis mine). Indeed, here state-making could go without nation-building, when it was not at odds with it. The crystallisation of the hills/plains divide on the NEFA-Assam border eventually became the source of important conflicts between the two after Arunachal Pradesh's creation (Bhattacharya 1995). Rather than the nationalisation of a frontier space (Baruah 2007a, 34), the integration of NEFA under Nehru through the 'magic bullet' of development (Baruah 2007b, 17) was a process engaging the state and the local people in a tight embrace, but one that sidelined the nation.

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